

Circumcision of the heart (Renewal of the Covenant- Part 2)

Joshua 5:1-12

Key Verse: 5:2 “At that time the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.’”

In the history of the nation of Israel, one of the greatest events, was their entry into the Promised Land according to God’s promise given to Abraham and all his descendants long ago. After 400 painful years of slavery in Egypt, and additional 40 years wandering in the desert wilderness, the Israelites have finally stepped foot in the Promised land. We can imagine their excitement and anticipation to enter and possess the promised land—the land of abundance. Their dream of settling down, to build homes and plant fields, to raise their families, was about to be fulfilled! But one important question remains— what was God’s intention of bringing Israel as a nation into his Holy land? Exodus 19:5-6 says, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

So, today’s passage is how God prepared them as the new generation of Israelites from the wilderness entered the promised land. God prepared them by first renewing his covenant with them. Like them, we too are coming out of the wilderness-like pandemic into a new unknown era. Like them, God’s hope and purpose for us to live as his kingdom of priests and a holy nation, and enter the promised land, is still the same. So, through this message, may God prepare us by first renewing his covenant with us today.

I. Circumcision and Passover (1-12)

In Joshua 3, the Israelites had followed the ark of the covenant to cross the divided Jordan River. The Jordan River was the dividing line between the wilderness and the Promised Land. They finally arrived at the very entrance of the Promised Land. No more wilderness life! Was it flowing with milk and honey? It was not. The gigantic, high and thick, heavily fortified walls of Jericho were standing in their way.

What should Joshua do as the leader? Look at verse 2a. “At that time, the Lord said to Joshua...” In truth, the true leader, the commander-in-chief, of the army of Israel was the Lord. The Lord gave a command to Joshua. Look at verse 2b. “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.” What kind of command was that? Look at verse 3. “So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth.”

Why did God command the whole nation to be circumcised again at that crucial moment? God himself explains three reasons in verses 3-9.

Firstly, circumcision was the seal of their renewal of the covenant with God. What is a covenant? Covenant is a contract, a treaty between two parties, in this case between God and the new generation of Israelites from the wilderness. And what were its contents? God promised to be their God, and they would become his people. God would give them the land. They were to obey him and his law fully (Joshua 1:7). But the covenant was more than law-keeping. They were to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. (Deut 6:5). If so, then out of all nations, they would be his treasured possession, and he would make them a great nation (Genesis 12:1,2), a kingdom of priests and holy nation (Ex 19:5-6). He would bless them and make them prosperous and successful in the promised land (Joshua 1:7-9). What an amazing treaty- God was giving them a new identity and honor as God's chosen and beloved people, among all the people of the world.

When the people of Israel first left Egypt, they had accepted this covenant with the Lord, saying, "We will do everything the Lord has said" (Ex 19:8). Yet, that generation of Israelites who had made that covenant at Mount Sinai had all died in the wilderness, punished by God for their disobedience and for breaking their covenant with God again and again. But God did not abandon the people of Israel. Instead, God who is gracious and unconditionally faithful, longed to renew his covenant with this new generation of Israelites. God wanted to give the second generation of Israelites the promised land and be their God. But first, he wanted to renew his covenant with them. And the way he renewed was through circumcision of all the men.

What is circumcision? It is to cut off the foreskin of a man's private part with a flint knife without anesthesia. Ouch! Circumcision of all the fighting men sounds like a terrible idea while war was imminent. Yet why was circumcision God's way to renew the covenant? The ritual of circumcision originated when Abraham and all his household including women entered into the covenant relationship with God. He, his sons and all the male in his household had to be circumcised, on their most private and personal part, the part of the body that brought forth life and godly offspring, as the seal or stamp of the covenant (Gen 17:9-14, 24-27). They had to submit not just their arm or leg to God's ownership, but had to submit and let God cut and mark their deepest, most personal, their most hidden part of who they are. Literally, the core of who they are had a permanent mark that reminded them of their identity and honor as God's chosen and beloved people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5-6). Without circumcision, they had no covenant with God, and no one could be His people.

As they renewed this covenant through circumcision, God was promising his faithful presence with them. God was committing himself to them to be their God, their King, their Protector and Provider. In response, the Lord God wanted them to be committed to him as his people. Soon they would enter the land of Canaan where all kinds of idols were worshiped and their idolatrous, violent, sexually immoral practices were everywhere. There were many uncircumcised kings and nations waiting to tempt and destroy them. But God's covenant with them would make all difference in the Promised Land. Unless they had God's faithful presence with them, the Promised Land would not be the Promised Land. Rather it would be a land of corruption and compromise and confusion. Through their circumcision, God wanted them to consecrate, dedicate themselves to Him alone while living in the land. This is the first reason why it was necessary for them to be circumcised.

Secondly, through circumcision God wanted to roll away the reproach of Egypt from them (9). Look at verse 9. "Then the Lord said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.' So, the place has been called Gilgal to this day." Through circumcision, God purged the reproach of Egypt from them. Contemporary English Version translates "the reproach of Egypt" as "the disgrace of my people to be slaves in Egypt." What was the disgrace and shame of Egypt that God had cut off from them? God's chosen people had been slaves to the Egyptians. They baked bricks and built cities and the pyramids for the Egyptians, as beasts of burden, no better treated than oxen. Their sons were thrown into the Nile River. While living as slaves, they developed a survival mentality. Food and water was more important than their own identity or integrity. They learned to work only as much as they were whipped. They had a deep bitterness against task masters and Pharaoh, not to mention against their God.

Even after God brought them out of Egypt with the miraculous ten plagues, after he parted the Red Sea so they crossed through on dry ground, and destroyed the Egyptian army; after God's gracious covenant with them, making them his precious treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, they kept rejecting their new identity as God's holy nation and those dearly loved by God. Rather, they reverted back to their old Egyptian slave identity again and again. They constantly grumbled against God and against their leader Moses. When they didn't have water, they wanted to stone Moses. When they didn't have food, they remembered the pots of meat of Egypt, and wanted to go back to Egypt. Even when they ate Manna from heaven every day, they complained that they were sick and tired of manna, and missed Egyptian steak. God called them a stiff-necked people.

Beyond their constant grumbling and complaining, they were unbelieving in the power of God. At the border of the land of Canaan, just as they were about to enter the

promised land, they didn't believe in God's promise that he would be with them and would give them the land. Rather, they saw the giant-like people in their walled cities. They saw themselves as little grass-hoppers, who would be surely stomped on and destroyed. So, God punished his people, making them wander for 40 years in the desert, as restless wanderers on the earth, until the entire unbelieving generation perished like sand blown away.

They also doubted God's love and his goodness. In every situation, they thought that God was out to kill them and destroy them in any and all circumstances. When they had no water or food, they believed that God had brought them out to starve to death or die of thirst. When God was sending them into the promised land, they believed that God was sending them there to be killed.

Indeed, the Israelites were full of reproach and shame of Egypt because of their sins and their stubborn refusal to accept their new identity. But today, through the ceremony of circumcision, not only was their foreskin cut off, but their old sinful identity, their sinful habits, their sinful way of thinking about themselves and about God, were being cut off. After circumcision, God declared them free from the reproach, the shame, the disgrace of Egypt and free from their sins of grumbling, unbelief, distrust in God. God was declaring that they were no longer the slaves of Egypt, nor wanderers in the wilderness. God was declaring that they were now the thankful, holy, trusting beloved and pure people who belonged to God. And from this time, they were to live with this true identity as God's holy people, full of joy and rest in the promised land enjoying God's abundant love and provision and blessings.

Thirdly, circumcision was the prerequisite of celebrating the Passover. Exodus 12:48 states that no uncircumcised male can eat the Passover. Circumcision was not the end, but the prerequisite to celebrate the Lord's Passover, which was the second ritual God commanded them to keep in order to prepare the new generation.

Look at verse 10. "On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover." What was the Passover? It was the tenth and terrible plague that set the Israelites free. On the night of the Passover, each family had to kill one innocent one year old lamb, and put its blood on the doorway of their home, and roast and eat the lamb. And that night, God sent the angel of death, as his instrument of judgment and wrath to punish every household by killing the firstborn son, including Pharaoh's son. But any family that had the blood of the lamb on their doorways were passed over, and spared by the angel of death. Exodus 12:24 says, "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as promised, observe this ceremony.

And when your children ask you, ‘what does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’ The Passover celebration was to commemorate God’s deliverance from their bondage of slavery in Egypt. Though the new generation had not participated in Exodus in person, they were spared from death in the wilderness. Now, they were most privileged to enter the Promised Land which their ancestors couldn’t. As they celebrated the Lord’s Passover, and remembered his mercy upon them through the blood of the Passover lamb, they were filled with gratitude and joy and praise to God.

In summary, God prepared the new generation of Israelites to enter and live in the Promised land by renewing his covenant with them through circumcision and celebrating the Passover.

II. Circumcision of the heart and the new covenant

So how is God’s preparation of the new generation of Israelites relevant to us, as Christians? In other words, what is the covenant God wants to make or renew with us? What should be done? Is it through physical circumcision, and trying really hard to keep all the laws like the people of Israel?

Even in the Old testament, God had revealed his will to make a new covenant, a better, and more complete covenant with us. Seeing their unfaithfulness even in the Promised Land, Jeremiah prophesied in Jer. 31:31-34, “‘The days are coming...this is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people...I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’” This new covenant will not be based on our efforts to obey and please God. For we cannot obey God fully with our human effort for our hearts are deceitful beyond cure. Our hearts are always making other gods to worship. No matter how hard we try or want to love God with all our hearts, we cannot.

So Jesus one-sidedly made a new covenant with us and he circumcised our hearts, and changes us from the inside out. How did he make his new covenant with us? It was through his blood poured out on the cross, as the ultimate Passover lamb, who was killed in our places. Mark 14:23-24 says, “Then he(Jesus) took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them (his disciples), and they all drank from it. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” When he hung on the cross, his blood poured down from the thorns on his head, the nails piercing his hands and feet, and oozed from the flogging on his back; and when he died, he was pierced on his side and water and blood gushed out. Anyone who accepts by faith that Jesus’ blood poured out is for my sin, and by faith, smears his blood onto our hearts, then we are set free from

our deceitful and wicked hearts. We are set free from anger and wrath and punishment of God. We are set free from the death we deserve, and set free from slavery to sin. We become a new creation in Christ, with a new identity. This is the covenant we are to renew today.

1 Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” What a beautiful covenant God has made with us through Christ! We are also no longer strangers to God. We are his chosen, special people. We are royalty, the children of the King of kings. We are a holy nation who reflect the goodness and holiness of God. We belong to God. And we live to declare the praises of God who did not leave us in slavery and darkness of sin and death, but called us into a new and wonderful life and light. Thank God for this identity and covenant with us!

But how do we enter for the first time into this covenant relationship with God or renew it? After the Old testament, we do not need to be circumcised physically. So then, what should be done to us? Surprisingly, the OT reveals in Deut. 30:5-6 what the physical circumcision looks forward to. “He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” By knowing the limits of their physical circumcision, God had already promised that he will circumcise their hearts, and our hearts, so that we can love him with all our hearts and with all our souls, and live.

After his ascension, our Risen Lord and King Jesus poured upon his disciples--his believers, the Holy Spirit as the seal of his ownership on them (2Co 1:21-22). The Holy Spirit circumcises our hearts (Rom 8:13) with the word of God, which is living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword (Heb 4:12). So anyone who has received the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ has entered the new covenant relationship with God and has received the Holy Spirit. Today, let the Holy Spirit newly circumcise my heart and your heart. Let the Holy Spirit remove the reproach of this sinful world: all kinds of sins, fears, worries of life, and pleasures of the world that have contaminated us. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to enter and penetrate the most secret, private and hidden places of our hearts and minds and put his mark of ownership there. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to roll away our shame and disgrace of our sins and even the sins of our fathers and ancestors. Let us allow the Holy spirit to renew our new identity, not as slaves, not as victims, not as survivalists, not as abandoned orphans. Rather let us make a new, renewed commitment to our Lord and Savior Jesus. And let us live as his chosen people, a royal priesthood, a

people belonging to God, that we may declare the praises of him who called you and me out of darkness into his wonderful light!

Based on our renewed covenant relationship with God, I have hope for our UIC ministry and our church. It will become like the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. It will overflow with love, life, hope, joy, abundant food and coffee once again. It will be a vibrant community where we live as priests serving our God and praying for UIC students, declaring the praises of God who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. Do you want to enter into such a promised land together?